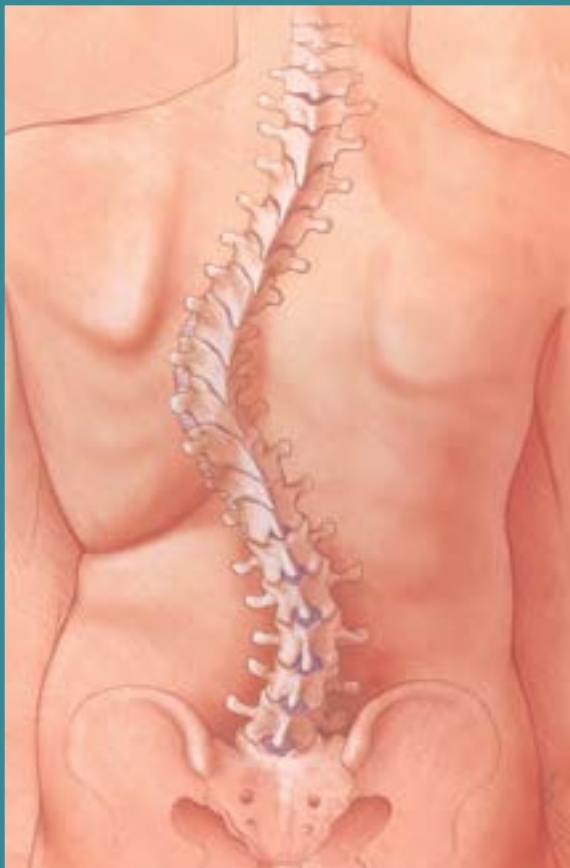


# Scoliosis



Living with  
Your Spinal  
Curvature

# UNDERSTANDING SCOLIOSIS

Having **scoliosis** means that your spine (backbone) curves and twists instead of growing straight. When you were told that you have scoliosis, you may have been angry, upset, or even scared. These feelings are normal. But scoliosis can be treated. This booklet will help you learn more about scoliosis, how it's treated, and what it may mean for you.

## What Is Scoliosis?

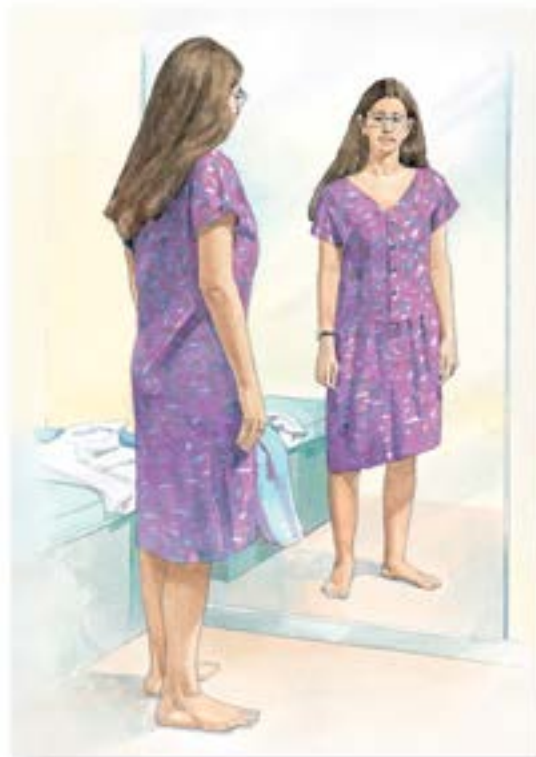
Scoliosis is a problem that makes the spine curve and twist from side to side. It is most often found in girls in their early teens. But boys can have it, too. No one is sure what causes scoliosis. But we do know that scoliosis is *not* caused by things like carrying heavy bags or playing sports. If someone in your family (like a parent or a sibling) has scoliosis, you may be more likely to have it, too.

## What Are the Signs?

The signs of scoliosis may include:

- One shoulder higher than the other
- One shoulder blade sticking out farther than the other
- An uneven waistline
- Hems hanging unevenly on you

These signs often appear slowly as you grow. You and your parents may not even notice them. For this reason, schools in many states have screening programs to check for scoliosis. These programs help find scoliosis early and keep it from causing problems later.



*"I couldn't get my clothes to hang straight."*

This booklet is not intended as a substitute for professional medical care. Only your healthcare provider can diagnose and treat a medical problem.

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## Why Treat Scoliosis?

A serious spinal curve that isn't treated can get worse as you grow. Over time, it may cause problems. These can include:

- Back pain
- Arthritis in your back
- Your body looking twisted
- Clothes not fitting right
- Heart and breathing problems (rare)

## How Is Scoliosis Treated?

Your doctor will suggest the best treatment for you. It is based on your age, how much more you are likely to grow, and the size and type of your spinal curve. The three types of treatment for scoliosis are:

- **Observation**—Watching a small curve to see if it changes as you grow.
- **Bracing**—Wearing a brace until your spine is fully grown to keep a curve from getting worse.
- **Surgery**—Operating to stop a very serious curve from getting worse.



*"I had a lot of questions about my back. At first, I was afraid to ask them. But when I finally did, my doctor explained things and helped me understand."*

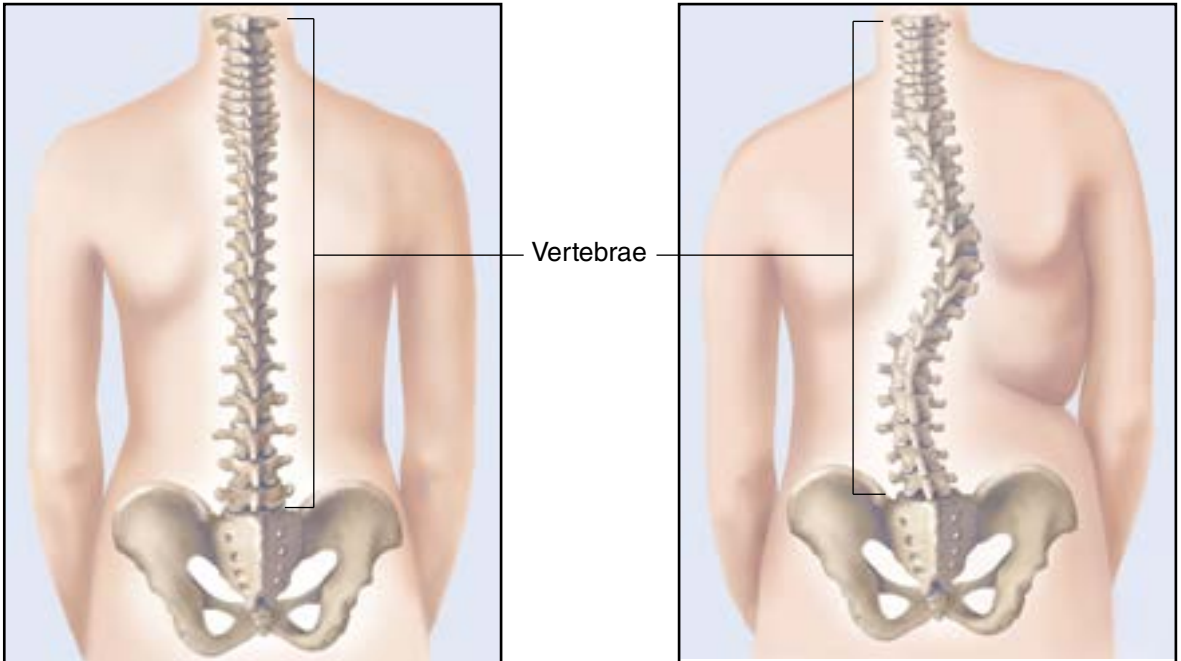
## A Note to Parents

Keep these tips in mind:

- Hearing that your child has scoliosis can be upsetting. But remember that it can be treated.
- Go to all your child's appointments. Ask questions and be sure you understand the doctor's instructions.
- Become informed about scoliosis. Try the library or contact the organizations listed on the back cover of this booklet.
- Form a team with your child and the doctor. Be your child's coach and biggest fan.
- Know that each child is different. Your child's doctor will choose the treatment that is best for your child's spine.

# LOOKING INSIDE YOUR BACK

Your spine is made up of 24 separate bones called **vertebrae**. These vertebrae are stacked on top of each other and are connected together. They support your back and let you move. In a healthy spine, the vertebrae form a straight line when you look at them from the front or the back. But when you have scoliosis, the vertebrae curve and twist from side to side.



## A Healthy Spine

If the spine is healthy:

- The spine forms a straight line from the neck to the hips when seen from the front or the back.
- The head is centered.
- Both shoulders are at the same height.
- Both shoulder blades stick out the same amount.
- Both sides of the waist look even.

## A Spine with Scoliosis

When you have scoliosis:

- Your spine curves into a “C” or “S” shape when seen from the front or the back.
- Your head may lean to one side.
- One shoulder may be higher than the other.
- One shoulder blade may stick out more than the other.
- One side of your waist may seem higher or flatter than the other.



## If the Spine Twists

When the spine curves, it may also twist. If the spine twists, your rib cage (which is attached to your spine) will twist, too. You may not notice this when you stand up. But when you bend over, twisting ribs may push up and form a “lump” on one side of your back. A twist in the spine can be measured. This is done with a special ruler called a **scoliometer**.

A twisting spine may cause a “lump” on your back when you bend over.

## Your Evaluation

If a school screening or your doctor finds signs of scoliosis, you’ll visit a special bone doctor (**orthopedic surgeon**) for an evaluation. This visit helps determine what treatment may be best for you now. During your evaluation, the bone doctor may:

- Ask you about your medical history (for instance, whether you’ve ever had surgery) and family history (whether someone in your family has scoliosis).
- Take x-rays of your back to get a closer look at your spine.
- Decide how much more you are likely to grow. (To help do this, the doctor may ask girls whether they’ve gotten their period yet.)
- Examine your back while you’re standing up and bending over.
- Measure the size, location, and pattern of the spinal curve.
- Test how flexible your spine is, and how strong your back and neck muscles are.



*“The doctor asked me to bend over. Then she used a scoliometer to see if there was a twist in my spine.”*



# LEARNING ABOUT YOUR BRACE

For many teens with scoliosis, wearing a brace is the best treatment. A brace helps stop the curve in your spine from getting worse as you grow. It may also help keep you from needing surgery. These two pages tell you more about wearing a scoliosis brace.

## How a Brace Works

A scoliosis brace is made out of plastic. It is shaped to fit your body. The brace holds your spine in place to keep the curve from getting worse. To do the job, it needs to be worn as directed by your doctor until you are fully grown.

## Fitting the Brace

There are several kinds of braces. Your doctor will talk to you about the best one for your type of scoliosis. An **orthotist** is the person who makes and fits the brace. Before the brace fits you right, you will most likely go to the orthotist a few times to have it adjusted. At first, wearing the brace may feel strange and awkward. But you should get used to it quickly.

## Why Wear Your Brace?

The brace helps keep your scoliosis from getting worse. If your scoliosis does get worse, you may need surgery. If you have questions or concerns about wearing your brace, talk to your doctor.



*"When I first got my brace, it was really uncomfortable. I felt like I couldn't even move. But I kept wearing it, and it got easier and easier. Now I sometimes even forget I have it on."*

## Some Tips to Help You

These tips can help make wearing your brace easier:

- Wear your brace under your clothing. Wear only a clean, close-fitting, white T-shirt under your brace to protect your skin. Change the T-shirt every day and when it gets dirty or sweaty.
- Keep your skin clean and dry. Shower daily.
- Don't hide the brace from your friends. Tell them what it is and why you have to wear it. You will most likely find that your friends will be great support.
- Ask your orthotist about the best way to clean your brace.
- See your doctor as often as he or she asks you to. This way, your doctor can check how well the brace is working for you.



*"I wear my brace over a T-shirt that fits tight so it doesn't have wrinkles."*

## Keeping Active

Your doctor may ask you to do some exercises to help keep your back flexible and make it stronger. Do them as often as your doctor suggests. Stay active by walking and doing other activities. You can still play sports if you want to. You can take your brace off for certain sports, such as swimming. Your doctor can tell you more about this.



*"My doctor gave me exercises to do. She said I can take my brace off when I do them."*

## When to Call Your Doctor

Call your doctor if you notice any of the following:

- You gain more than 10 pounds
- The brace starts fitting differently
- The brace hurts you or rubs your skin, causing redness or a rash
- Something keeps you from wanting to wear your brace

# LIVING WITH SCOLIOSIS

*"Sure, I had to make a few changes. But scoliosis hasn't stopped me from doing the things I enjoy, like riding and seeing my friends."*

## To Learn More, Contact:

**American Academy of  
Orthopaedic Surgeons**  
[orthoinfo.aaos.org](http://orthoinfo.aaos.org)

**National Scoliosis Foundation**  
800-673-6922  
[www.scoliosis.org](http://www.scoliosis.org)

**Scoliosis Research Society**  
[www.srs.org](http://www.srs.org)



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